

Senator Bob Bennett
Transcript of remarks delivered on the floor
following his vote against
S. 1, The Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act
June 14, 2001

I have three reasons for voting against this bill. The first one is money. The cost of this bill is twice what it was when it hit the floor to begin with. We added money here; we added money there. We had a drunken sailor's attitude toward this situation, "Education is wonderful, let's throw more money at it." Frankly, I am troubled by that view of how we should legislate around here. It struck me as being a bit out of control.

Secondly, as I heard more and more from the people from Utah who will have to live under this bill, they kept saying to me, "this feels an awful lot like a federal strait jacket. This feels an awful lot like federal control. This feels an awful lot like we are losing the power to run our own schools." And I find that troubling as well. I didn't run for the school board, I ran for the US Senate. Many of the decisions that were made with this bill were made on the assumption that Washington knows more than the school boards, and that troubles me.

But it is the third reason as I looked at the bill as whole that helped me decide to vote against it. I am passionate enough in my commitment to education that I could swallow the idea of more money. If we were getting the right results I could look the other way and say, since we are getting the right results, I can tolerate more federal control. But this bill is not a step forward in education. This bill is overwhelmingly timid. It has no significant new initiatives in it. It is funding the status quo to the maximum and the more I look at education, the more I think we need to break out of the status quo. We need to try new things. But any time a suggestion was made that we try something new, even on a pilot basis, in a very limited sense in just a few places, it was swatted down by the name of inertia of motion.

People talk about government as if inertia at rest is the problem. But it is my experience that it is inertia of motion that is the problem of government, not just the law of physics. A body in motion tends to stay in motion and in the same direction, whether it is a body moving through space in the physical world or whether it is a government agency moving through regulations, it is always moving the same way. It keeps things going. It takes yesterday's answers and tries to force them on today's problems.

As I look at this bill overall I do not see the boldness, the freshness, and the challenge to try to do something different and break out of the old patterns, that frankly were there when President Bush first submitted it. We in this body have added so much baggage to the exciting first motion that it is hard to recognize the President's initiatives in this bill. They are buried under piles of money and piles of direction that are rooted in the status quo and in the past.

So I decided that the bill is going to pass, despite what I try to do. But if I can get a little bit of attention because of the fact that the bill is not as bold, as innovative, as it started out to be by casting a negative vote, that would justify casting a negative vote. I remember when I first came here as a young senator, someone said to me, "Cast your vote with this in mind, how will you feel as you drive home thinking about it after the debate is over?" And I decided that as I drive home thinking about this one that I will drive home feeling better that I cast the protest vote.

I don't mean to suggest that anyone who voted for this bill wasn't voting out of complete, sincere dedication to the idea that this is something good. I don't mean to question the motives of anybody else, I simply want to explain my own. This bill has grown too expensive, this bill has grown into too much federal control, and the end result in terms of timidity and support for the status quo is simply not worth those first two. I hope the product that comes back from conference will be better and I will then be in a position to support it.